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Truth and the Tabloids

Adam Lee Potter

When the facts change, I change my mind.
What do you do?"

John Maynard Keynes (Bright, 1940: 24)

The drive to honesty

I have been a national newspaper journalist for 20 years. I've worked for The Sun, the Daily Mail and the Sunday Mirror. I have written for the Independent, the Observer, and the Sunday Times. I've been a news reporter, a sub, a features editor, a columnist and even a farming editor. But, essentially, I'm a writer, a teller of (true) stories. In my career, I have walked to the North Pole, been hospitalised by a paedophile's dog and flown on a bombing raid over Kosovo. I have been shot at in the Middle East, mugged in Benin and beaten up in Northern Ireland. I've bribed my way into a Balinese jail and put a fake bomb on a plane at Heathrow. Perhaps not surprisingly, I've been arrested twice. I'm proud of my profession and the smart, brave, hard-working people who populate it. Journalists are only ever as good as their last piece of copy. And that constant – though this claim will amuse some and infuriate others – tends to keep you honest.

Leveson: the beginning of the end or the end of the beginning?

So, the telephone-hacking debacle and consequent scrutiny have rocked us. Our reputation and, more importantly, our credibility, stand at an all-time low. Our very survival remains in question. That is a challenge that must urgently be met and one, which this chapter will seek to address. A free and unfettered press is the lynchpin of a civilised society. With circulation figures continuing to plummet, newspapers' failure to embrace the

“last chance saloon” heralded by the Press Complaints Commission 21 years ago could prove the death knell for a seemingly moribund industry. We may have the best press in the world but it is also the worst. A decent newspaper is, however, still life’s cheapest luxury and, as such, worth fighting for. What else costs pennies yet can entertain, educate and involve?

The Leveson Inquiry has, rightly, highlighted concerns. The so-called dark arts of investigative journalism, the murky relationship between journalists, police officers and politicians and the well-thumbed public interest defence, have all cringed beneath the judicial spotlight. If a News of the World investigator jeopardised the Milly Dowler murder investigation by deleting key ansaphone messages – though the Metropolitan Police dispute this claim – that is, of course, abhorrent. No one in their right mind would try – or wish – to defend such practice. Nor would they support the hacking of any phone – celebrity or otherwise – for the mere pursuit of prurient tittle-tattle. The only person who has attempted to do so is Paul McMullan, the defunct newspaper’s former features editor. Now a publican, McMullan has sought to recast himself as Fleet Street’s anti-hero, a gonzo mouthpiece. He not only admits hacking phones, he revels in the admission. His perverse justification, voiced on BBC2’s Newsnight, shamed us all:

I’ve always said that I’ve just tried to write articles in a truthful way and what better source of getting the truth is (sic) to listen to someone’s messages? (Newsnight, 2011)

The cogent response, on the same programme, from celebrity Steve Coogan – himself a victim of phone hacking – cut through such cant: “You’re a walking PR disaster for the tabloids.” (Newsnight, 2011). That is palpably true but McMullan no more speaks for tabloid journalists than Coogan speaks for the everyman. We should remember that even if every News of the World journalist had been guilty of phone hacking, that would still only have accounted for less than one per cent of journalists in this country. Compare that with the parliamentary expenses scandal in which 50 per cent of elected MPs defrauded the public purse. I am not advocating a whitewash; it has become rapidly clear that shabby and illegal behaviour was not confined to the News of the World.

Newsgathering is not always a transparent business

Rebekah Brooks – News International’s former chief executive officer - is set to face trial at the Old Bailey, charged with conspiracy to access voicemails and seeking to pervert the course of justice. Andy Coulson –David Cameron’s one-time Communications Director – five fellow former News of the World journalists, five former News International employees and a private investigator are also to appear in court facing related charges. In 2008, Kate and Gerry McCann accepted £550,000 in damages and a High Court apology over “utterly false and defamatory” stories published by Express Newspapers about the disappearance of their daughter, Madeleine. Broadsheets, too, have been called into question. The Times hacked into private emails to expose an anonymous blogger. The Sunday Times hired a conman to blag Gordon Brown’s property details. Even Nick Davies, the Guardian reporter who first alleged that the News of the World deleted Milly Dowler’s messages, was later forced to admit to having made a “very significant” error. Davies’ mealy-mouthed apologia encapsulated the subjectivity of truth: “Everybody involved in that story accepted that that story was true and continued to accept until four months later evidence that was not available, to everybody’s surprise, showed that one element of that story was now in doubt.” (Newsnight, 2011)

Again, I am not attempting to shift blame. Tabloids have, if anything, a greater responsibility than broadsheets. Eight million people buy a tabloid every day in the UK, equating to more than twenty million readers – a third of the population. As such, we have an acute duty to deliver truth. Newsgathering is not always, of course, a transparent business. If the Daily Telegraph had – instead of buying, as they did, leaked documents – attempted to stand up its expenses’ exclusive by merely contacting the House of Commons press office, there would have been, almost certainly, no story. That truism applies to any potentially damaging news story that might come a reporter’s way. Investigative journalism demands a level of intrigue and the line one treads is fine indeed.

As a news reporter at The Sun, I was tasked with testing security at Heathrow on the tenth anniversary of the Lockerbie bombing. I secured a job as a cleaner to see how easy it

would be to circumvent airside security and plant a bomb. It was, in fact, terrifyingly easy. I didn't lie on my job application: I gave my real name and contact details. I even said I worked for a company called Sun. I just didn't say I was an investigative journalist and that it was The Sun newspaper. In the aftermath of that story, the cleaning company had its contract revoked, 150 people lost their jobs and I received anonymous threats for six months but I would still argue that the means were justified by the end: a ruthless overhaul of airport security following a parliamentary inquiry.

But one of the unforeseen and unwelcome consequences of the Leveson era has been a troubling shift in focus, be it opportunistic or self-protective. Take the example of the 2012 Andrew Mitchell scandal. The Metropolitan Police is more concerned with identifying who leaked the story to The Sun than in investigating the ramifications of the Chief Whip abusing one of their officers.

The newspaper pointed out in an editorial: "We neither paid nor offered any money for this exclusive. It is the result of what is known as journalism. The public interest could not be more clear-cut. Britain has a right to know if a high-ranking Government member brands police 'morons' and 'plebs'." (The Sun, 2012.) Quite. The roguery of a few corrupt journalists must not be utilised to jeopardise the real interests of the many. Proper, investigative journalism is only ever an enemy to the guilty and, that being the case must be fiercely protected.

Who watches the watchmen?

Admittedly, we all make mistakes: politicians, police officers, bankers, even journalists. When journalists do get it wrong, we should confess and correct. Whatever body replaces the Press Complaints Commission – if it is, unlike its predecessor to survive and convince – it must champion that credo above all else. Ultimately, journalistic truth is – and should be – what you can prove, but there is one notable disclaimer: the Daily Mail's challenge to the men accused of the Stephen Lawrence murder. Above a photograph of the five men, the front - page headline ran: "Murderers. The Mail accuses these men of killing. If we are wrong, let them sue us." (Daily Mail, 1997) They never did, of course, and, 14 years after that story ran, two of

those men were retried and found guilty. After the verdict, editor-in-chief Paul Dacre said, ‘In many ways it was an unprecedented, outrageous step, but I’d like to think that as a result we did a huge amount of good and made history that day.’

Dacre’s subsequent plea to Lord Leveson was, therefore, all the more credible: “I’d also like to persuade you there are thousands of decent journalists in Britain who don’t hack phones, who don’t bribe policemen and who work long, anti-social hours for modest recompense ... because they passionately believe their papers give voice to the voiceless and expose the misdeeds of the rich, the powerful and the pompous.”

It is a widely-held misconception that tabloid journalists – unlike those from broadsheets, television or radio – are feral ne’er-do-wells who would do and say anything to nail a salacious scoop; monsters who would never let the truth get in the way of a story. Most journalists are, in fact, like most people, decent, but the few that are not run the gamut.

In his memoir, foreign correspondent Edward Behr told the story of a respected BBC TV reporter who, covering the brutal civil war in the Congo, had but one question to ask cowering refugees: “Anyone here been raped and speaks English?” (Behr, 1982, p136)

There are, naturally, errant tabloid hacks, too. Peter Chippindale and Chris Horrie, in their biography of *The Sun*, *Stick It Up Your Punter*, summed up tabloid culture at its worst: “On *The Sun* – and in tabloids in general – it was as if you had caught someone messing around with your wife. You shouldn’t stop to think about it. You just did what you thought was right and went round and punched them in the face.” (Chippindale and Horrie, 1999)

The late Alan Clarke, in his essay, *Why I Hold Journalists in Low Regard*, memorably decried tabloids’ “brutish culture, part base prejudice, part leering innuendo, which colours and informs the style in which these papers compete with one another”. (Glover, 1999, p286)

Former *Sun* editor Kelvin Mackenzie, arguably of the above school, defended his 13-year reign – which included his decision to run what turned out to be a false story about Sir Elton John that cost the paper £1million in libel damages - by telling Leveson in 2012: “Basically my view was that if it sounded right it was probably right and therefore we should lob it in.”

The truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth?

Mackenzie's style of editorship was itself proof that the notion of truth is far from straightforward. The Sun is still boycotted on Merseyside because of his notorious splash about the 1989 Hillsborough disaster in which 96 people died.

Beneath the headline *The Truth*, the paper – quoting a police source that we now know was part of a widespread cover-up launched by senior officers - claimed fans had pick-pocketed the dead and urinated on the bodies. The Sun was not the only newspaper to run the story but it was the only one to state, unequivocally, that it was the truth. That, notwithstanding the police conspiracy uncovered 23 years later, is what caused such enduring offence.

I learned that to my cost when I started shifting for The Sun in 1995. Fresh from a local paper, I was sent to cover the breaking story of two murdered schoolboys in the Wirral.

I was flattered to be sent on such a major story until I'd asked around in the local pub. "Hello, I'm from The Sun," I began. Two men carried me out while a third smashed my windscreen with a pool cue and told me to "hop it". I did. When I rang the news editor from a call box, I received anything but sympathy.

"Why do you think I sent you?" he demanded. "You don't work for The Sun. You're a freelance. You work for the Newcastle Journal."

Leveson, the legacy and lessons

When it comes to personal ethics, you've got to be true to yourself. There is pressure to perform and that pressure is never greater than when you start out. You will be asked to do things that make you feel uncomfortable. They may not be unethical per se but they may be wrong for you.

That is for the individual to decide. As a journalist, you are employed for your nous as much as for your courage or obedience and that is why, ultimately, good will come from the hacking scandal and ongoing inquiry. Scrutiny and knowledge are always instructive.

There are those who have called for a boycott of certain newspapers. Hugh Grant claims, absurdly, that there is no journalism to be found within tabloids. Tell that to the family

of Stephen Lawrence.

The world would be a poorer, and more dangerous, place without journalists. When Britain is closing hospitals, cutting benefits and charging students £9,000 a year to attend university, journalism is - if anything - more vital than ever. And in my experience, our stories come - not from electronic trickery - but from a combination of graft and luck.

In 2008, I was on a flight to Inverness. As I sat down with my Telegraph crossword, I recognised a voice in the seat behind me. Nick Clegg.

Blithely unaware, the Liberal Democrat leader spent the next hour and a half going through his supposedly secret shadow cabinet reshuffle.

Instead of filling in the crossword, I took down shorthand notes in the squares. Steve Webb was - among others - robustly critiqued. One across read: "My environment spokesman is a ***** *****".

Clegg's quasi-rebuttal of my subsequent Sunday Mirror article was a masterclass in obfuscation: "We don't comment on reports of fragments of private conversations."

The story was picked up by pretty much every other national newspaper, bar the Daily Star. Commentator Peter Preston wrote in the Observer: "No ethical rules were broken, no sacred trusts ruptured. And the message for Nick, or anyone else in his garrulous predicament, is clear: next time, whisper."

Indeed.

But for all the harrumphing of embarrassed politicians and exposed celebrities, it is the media's treatment of the Dowlers, the McCanns and their like that is the most harrowing and the most important to redress.

Journalists must never focus so keenly on the story that they negate the human beings who populate it.

It is not only unethical, it is bad practice. If you no longer care about people, you have no business being a journalist. You need empathy and heart as much as honesty and pluck.

We will always need journalism and, that said, we will always need journalists. But let us not fool ourselves: newspapers are under real threat. The medium, still largely flummoxed by the online challenge, is changing fast and malfeasance - both real and perceived - has hastened the decline.

Whether newspapers become freesheets, funded by adver-

tising alone, publish solely online or morph into magazines, radio stations or satellite channels, journalists, both new and old, need to learn some key lessons.

Yes, we have a commercial imperative to give readers what they want. But we also have an absolute responsibility to give them what they need. We should add to society, not detract from it.

Journalism is, after all, the first draft of history: George Orwell's "historical impulse", a "desire to see things as they are, to find out true facts and store them up for the use of posterity". (Orwell, 1946, p5)

If we adhere to that mantra, we will not just survive, we will flourish.

Challenging Questions

- From hacking to paying for stolen information, is it ever justifiable for a journalist to break the law?
- First and false, or late and legitimate? Which is the better media model?
- What are the key lessons to be learned from Leveson?
- Regulation: self or state? Can either ever work? Is there a third way?
- Who defines public interest? How - and why - should newspapers adhere to an inherently subjective code?

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